



REPORT

VOLUME 7 NO. 1 SUMMER 1994

An NBC-TV newsmagazine's cynically skewed reporting on the "power of prayer"

by Gary P. Posner, M.D.

Last December I received a telephone call from Liz Fischer, a producer with NBC-TV's weekly newsmagazine *Now*, who was working on a story about Dr. Larry Dossey and his new book, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine* (see my book review on page 3). Dossey had begun his research after hearing of a study claiming that cardiac care unit patients who are prayed for do better than others who are not. In his book, Dossey cites a Spring 1990 *Free Inquiry* magazine article in which I critiqued the CCU study and found it wanting. That's precisely why *Now* wanted me.

In contrast to its sister newsmagazine *Dateline NBC*, best known for having phoned a fiery truck crash last year to punch-up a story, *Now* is fronted by NBC's top news personalities: Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric. So when Fischer asked if I would do an interview for broadcast, I humbly suggested that she first contact the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and *Free Inquiry* to see if they might be able to provide instead a nationally recognized authority. Fischer called back days later to tell me that she had been put in touch with CSICOP Fellow Dr. Wallace Sampson, who told her about a doctor Posner in Florida who had written a terrific article for *Free Inquiry*. I agreed to do the show.

Fischer rushed me a copy of the embarrassingly naive *Healing Words*, which I spent the weekend (in)digesting. As she wanted to know what sorts of comments I would feel comfortable making on camera, I faxed her my suggested "sound bites":

I was surprised to see how critical Dossey himself was of the CCU study. In fact, he found several shortcomings that even I hadn't appreciated.

Curiously, in spite of his own skepticism of the study's results, Dossey writes: "If the technique being studied had been a new drug or a surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would almost certainly have been heralded as some sort of 'breakthrough.'" Perhaps so if the claim had been something fairly mundane. But when a researcher claims to have proven something *supernatural*, that's another story. Remember the media hype over "cold fusion" a few years

ago? The scientific community quite properly maintained an extremely skeptical attitude. And, of course, *that* supernatural claim seems to have been imaginary.

Dossey also says: "Even some hard-boiled skeptics agreed [at the time] on the significance of the study's findings." But that just goes to show that even "skeptics" are sometimes not skeptical enough. There's a generally accepted principle in science that the more extraordinary the claim, the more extraordinary the proof required to support it. And not only is that degree of proof lacking in this study, it seems lacking in every human study of prayer to date.

Dossey builds his case largely upon anecdotes and the work of parapsychologists, and appears to accept their supernatural claims at face value. This is very dangerous. Almost invariably, when "hard-nosed skeptics," as Dossey calls us, dissect parapsychology studies . . . or when the parapsychologists call in skeptics to oversee their experimental procedures to make absolutely certain that no cheating can occur, their findings evaporate.

Dossey says: "We do not know how spiritual healing works. . . . Many skeptics argue that this is sufficient reason for tossing it out the window." Science hasn't tossed prayer "out the window." But those who wish for science to embrace the miraculous power of prayer as a scientifically proven fact must provide experimental evidence so convincing that even the "hard-nosed skeptics" can't poke holes in it. We can't bend the rules and make it easy. And when that day finally comes, if it ever does, *that's* the day that our science books should be updated to include chapters on the miraculous power of prayer.

I would have been more than happy to have had the opportunity to say those words and nothing more. But several days later Fischer called back to inform me that, although she was very sorry, NBC didn't want to pay to fly a crew to Florida to interview me. She did, however, express general agreement with my comments, and noted that her own staff had already recognized the significance of Dossey's reliance upon parapsychology. And in our previous conversation, she had told me how much the segment's correspondent, Brian Murphy, had liked my *Free Inquiry* article. Maybe they would interview Dr. Sampson, she said, when they soon returned to California on other business.

The segment, one of three during the hour-long program, aired on March 30. It showed a leukemia patient who had beaten overwhelming odds: "Look at me. I'm living proof of what prayer can do." Correspondent

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TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS Statement of Purpose and "\$1,000 Challenge"

Tampa Bay Skeptics, Inc. is a non-profit educational and scientific organization devoted to the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims, and the dissemination of factual information about such claims to interested parties throughout the Tampa Bay area and environs. TBS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective and critical inquiry. We share the philosophy of the international Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), though TBS is an autonomous local group and is not formally affiliated with CSICOP.

TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" is open to anyone claiming verifiable scientific proof of the reality of ESP, UFOs, dowsing, astrology, or any paranormal phenomenon. Please contact us for complete details.

TBS Report is published quarterly. We welcome news clippings, and articles and letters for publication (subject to editing for length, clarity, and taste), including opposing points of view. As our budget is very limited, stamped, self-addressed return envelopes would be appreciated with all correspondence.

Views expressed in articles and letters are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Tampa Bay Skeptics.

TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS REPORT

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CHAIRMAN'S

OR R N E R

1994 CSICOP Conference — Part I

by Terry A. Smiljanich

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) hosted more than 700 people, some from as far away as Germany and Hong Kong, at its 1994 conference, entitled "The Psychology of Belief," on June 23-26 in Seattle. Gary Posner and I both attended, a first for me, but only one of many for Gary. Many of CSICOP's major lights were also there, including chairman Paul Kurtz, Kendrick Frazier (editor of *Skeptical Inquirer*), UFO Subcommittee chairman Philip Klass, and keynote speaker Carl Sagan. And although he resigned from CSICOP for legal reasons (see Summer '91 issue), James "The Amazing" Randi was actively present as well.

The first session, devoted to "Alien Abductions," created the most fireworks, and was covered on the national newswires. Psychology professor Dr. Robert Baker theorized that many "abductees" are actually victims of sleep disorders such as hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, "waking dreams" experienced by 4-5% of the population, in which one feels paralyzed or in the presence of a ghost-like apparition. Dr. William Kohn, a psychologist who has counseled "abductees," charged that the field is replete with poor investigators and subjects whose motives may include notoriety and profit. On the other hand, folklorist Dr. Thomas Bullard argued that the consistency of abduction tales points to their possible truth.

But the star attraction of this session was none other than Dr. John Mack, the Harvard psychiatrist and abduction "guru." Mack noted that his colleagues had told him that he'd have to be "crazy" to come to speak to this skeptical audience, but he boldly plunged ahead, stressing that his many "abductees," from widely divergent age groups and cultural backgrounds, tell tales with high degrees of consistency. He acknowledged a lack of "proof," but argued that he did not lack "evidence" that alien sexual experimentation is ongoing. He suggested that skeptics evidenced a "fear of unseen worlds" and a "hysteria about a [real] world beyond rationality."

After these speakers had finished, moderator Paul Kurtz presented two "abductees," one who truly believes that she was abducted from her car and taken aboard a spacecraft, and another, Donna Bassett, who was featured in the April 25 *Time* magazine exposé on Dr. Mack entitled "The Man From Outer Space." Bassett described how easy it was to fool Mack into believing her false story about being abducted as a child and encountering John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev aboard the alien craft. She alleged an utter lack of scientific methodology by Mack, and argued that his psychiatric intervention is actually harmful to his patients rather than therapeutic, citing as one example his use of "support groups" to reinforce belief in alien abductions. Mack, surprised and outraged by Bassett's last-minute invitation to the conference (tragically, one scheduled speaker had been killed in an airplane crash just days earlier), maintained that Bassett may actually be an abductee who doesn't realize it! He also questioned her motives, and suggested that she had been "put up to this" by Philip Klass, who many years ago had briefly shared an office at *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine with her husband. Klass then stormed to the podium from the hall to angrily deny this "accusation."

The ensuing question and answer session was also lively, with most of the questions being directed to Dr. Mack. One pointed out that the "consistent descriptions" argument of both Mack and Bullard could be used as "evidence" for the existence of angels. Several questioners thanked Mack for having the "courage" to come and speak to CSICOP, even though they remained extremely skeptical of his claims. Another stated that Mack had actually done the public a "favor" by his use of regression hypnosis to uncover tales of alien abductions. He pointed out that when such techniques were first used to "prove" the existence of widespread sexual abuse of children, the public tended to believe it. When the technique was then used to demonstrate the "epidemic" of satanic cult ritual abuse, the public became more skeptical. Along comes Dr. Mack arguing that hundreds of thousands of humans are being abducted, levitated into spaceships, and subjected

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BOOK REVIEW by Gary P. Posner, M.D.**Medical Practice Enters a New Age**

HEALING WORDS: *The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*. By Larry Dossey, M.D. (HarperCollins, New York, 1993. 291 pages. Hardcover, \$22.00)

In the Preface to *Healing Words*, Dr. Larry Dossey tells of how he was "surprised to discover a single scientific study [the CCU study discussed in my page 1 article] that strongly supported the power of prayer in getting well," and how it inspired a personal quest to "probe the scientific literature for further proof of prayer's efficacy." Soon Dossey, who had "planned to become a minister" before deciding instead to attend medical school, made the decision to pray for his patients: "I would go to my office earlier than usual each morning. . . . As the incense filled the room, I would invoke the Absolute. . . . I would shake several rattles and gourds, paraphernalia used worldwide by shamans and healers to 'invoke the powers.' . . . I felt a connection with healers of all cultures and ages." Dossey has since retired from active medical practice to write and lecture, and co-chaired a committee reviewing mind-body studies for the Office of Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health.

Dossey has come to the conclusion that God need not be 'up there' but rather that "the Divine factor in prayer is internal." Further, says Dossey, consciously directed prayers for a specific outcome are far less effective than prayers initiated *unconsciously*: "Unobstructed, the unconscious during sleep and dreams may be free to realize its natural, innate affinity with the Divine." Such speculative bridges throughout the book, and the puddles of "scientific" evidence that they serve to interconnect, evoke images of Percival Lowell's illusory Martian network of canals and oases. And any similarity in Dossey's philosophy to "negative psi" (whereby psychics' best results occur when not even trying) is no mere coincidence — Dossey embraces many such parapsychological claims as among his strongest "scientific" evidence.

Dossey's detailed discussion of the *Southern Medical Journal's* CCU study (July 1988) began predictably enough: "If the technique being studied had been a new drug or a surgical procedure instead of prayer, it would almost certainly have been heralded as some sort of 'breakthrough.'" But I was taken aback as Dossey then proceeded to offer an assessment of the study as critical as my own *Free Inquiry* critique. Despite his earlier praise of the study that had so inspired his quest, Dossey ultimately was left with the realization that "this study has missed the mark. . . . [W]e would expect greater evidence than a few small percentage points of improvement. We would want

to see statistically significant life-or-death effects, which simply did not occur."

Dossey concurs with the "many researchers [who] feel it is easier to study the effects of prayer in simple, *nonhuman* living systems (emphasis in original). Prayer experiments in simpler life forms are much less ambiguous, involve fewer variables, and are easier to interpret." He cites many "consistent, replicable, and robust" experiments from the parapsychological literature, and mentions "the late Olga Worrall, the well-known psychic healer," who demonstrated an ability to "protect" one of two samples of bacteria exposed to a toxic agent. The results, published in a 1980 parapsychology book, "showed that the 'protected' bacteria indeed survived in greater numbers than the controls, at levels of great statistical significance."

Those results were also published in the *Star* tabloid, and a friend promptly sent me the clipping. I then called Worrall on the telephone (both she and I were living in Baltimore at the time). When I introduced myself as a scientist who couldn't help but be a bit skeptical of her findings, she said, "Well, you're not a true scientist then. A scientist is supposed to be inquiring . . . but not with skepticism." Clearly, neither she nor the "scientists" with whom she worked had a clue as to the requisite role of skepticism in scientifically evaluating such alleged abilities.

Among the many other claims embraced by Dossey: Uri Geller's powers; voodoo and "distant hexing"; a "93 percent accurate" cold-reader; "Therapeutic Touch" (the New Age technique recently scandalizing the Colorado Board of Nursing); Robert Jahn's random-event generator experiments which "transcend space [and] time" (and which have since been debunked in a parapsychology journal!); William Braud's experiments showing that "the mental images of one person can modify the activity of the autonomic nervous system of a distant person [who is] unaware that the attempt is being made"; the Biblical story (Joshua 10:12-14) of the sun standing still: "In addition to standing still, could time become 'disjointed,' such that the future would precede the present, or the present precede the past?" (Anecdote: an unidentified man was spontaneously cured of colon cancer through his minister's prayer *before* the prayer was even said!)

Having adopted the parapsychological worldview as his standard of reference, Dossey's subchapter on "Why Do Drugs Work?" becomes almost understandable: "[To] doctors and scientists in general . . . [t]he possibility that a physician's thoughts and beliefs could actually shape a patient's physiological responses [to a drug] — at a distance, even when the patient is unaware — is unthinkable. This has resulted in a virtual blindness in

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SNIPPETS

Many thanks are in order to the "church" of Scientology for clarifying just how aspirin, the "miracle drug," works its wonders. According to *The Scientology Handbook*, painkillers such as aspirin "inhibit the ability of the thetan (soul) to create mental image pictures . . ." rendering the thetan "stupid, blank, forgetful, delusive . . . irresponsible . . . not trustworthy, a menace to his fellows, actually."

(*St. Pete. Times [Clearwater edition], May 29*)

The following makes only slightly less sense: "Texdl sfaerr ad rtaetr adf aer v aer avc; lkadjr vvvaer alj lkaerh." This direct quote from a news release issued by U.S. Senator Nancy Kassenbaum was her official response, "in her native tongue," to the *Weekly World News*' revelation that she and eleven other Senators are actually space aliens. Sen. William Cohen, also "outed" by WWN, offered a more decipherable reply to a stunned nation: "It is preferable to be a space alien than a space cadet."

(*Baltimore Sun, May 26*)

Dr. Roy Kupsinel, founder of the American Quack Association, has been charged by the Florida Board of Medicine with false advertising. Activities such as his use of an "accuspark" to treat arthritis, injections of hydrogen peroxide and adrenal cortex extract to cure AIDS, and promotion of the "Fat Eliminator" to "kiss your fat goodbye forever" prompted one Board member to call Kupsinel a "charlatan" and "a real dinosaur." And even his claim to be a "Quack" seems dubious, as the letters are said to stand for "QUALity Care with Kindness."

(*St. Pete. Times, June 4*)

The California man mentioned in last issue's Chairman's Corner, who claimed that his daughter's allegations of sexual abuse were the result of "false memories" implanted by her therapists, has prevailed in a precedent-setting court drama. A Napa jury decided 10-2 that Western Medical Center in Anaheim, Dr. Richard Rose (chief of psychiatry at the hospital), and a mental health therapist were negligent in their treatment of Holly Ramona, now age 23, who said that her father had repeatedly raped her when she was between five and eight years old. But rather than receiving the \$8-million that he had sought, Gary Ramona was awarded only \$500,000 for lost wages. He was fired from a \$400,000-a-year job when the false allegations surfaced in 1990, and his wife has divorced him.

(*St. Pete. Times, May 15*)

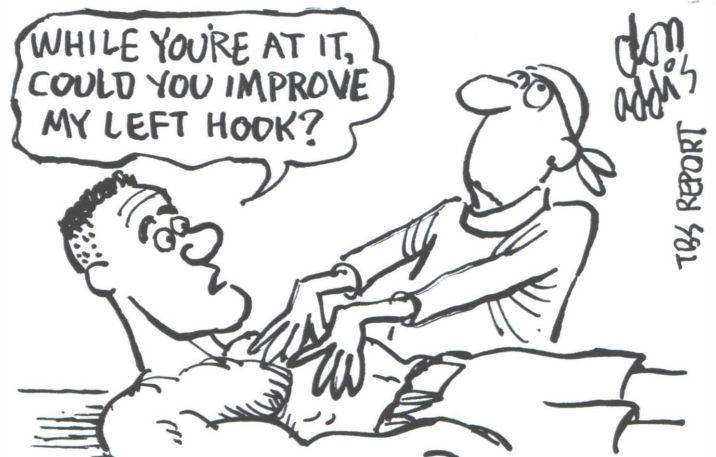
Dorothy Ann Mitchell, a Delray Beach "psychic," has been arrested on charges of organized fraud, grand theft and obtaining property by fraudulent means. Mitchell, who had contracted with a retiree to exorcise an evil curse for \$20,000, employed sleight-of-hand to make it appear that a voodoo doll's head had emerged from a squashed tomato, or vice versa, to demonstrate that the evil is in the head (don't ask me — I just report this stuff). Mitchell's

alleged scam operation might have continued unabated, had her "psychic" power alerted her to the fact that this particular "retiree" was actually an undercover detective.

(*Tampa Tribune, April 29*)

Former heavyweight champion Evander "Real Deal" Holyfield has bet \$265,000 on the hand (or house of cards?) dealt to him by Orlando "faith-healer" Benny Hinn. That's how much Holyfield, who retired after his last fight due to a newly diagnosed heart ailment, has paid Hinn for allegedly "curing" him. But Hank Hanegraaff, founder of the California-based Christian Research Institute, writes in his book, *Crisis in Christianity*, that Hinn once claimed to have cured a man of colon cancer when the tumor had actually been excised by a *real* surgeon.

(*St. Pete. Times, June 22*)



Tampa Bay "psychic" Gary Spivey, known to sport a multi-colored wig when the mood strikes him, is now gracing the radio airwaves with his own nightly program. WSUN-AM 620 had a difficult choice to make, but management decided to open the 6-8 p.m. time slot, which was previously occupied by a taped reply of *Hooters on the Radio* with Lynne Austin and friends. Somehow, radio doesn't do either of these acts justice.

(*St. Pete. Times, May 9*)

And from our "So What Else Is New?" Department: Findings recently released by the American Museum of Natural History suggest that the majority of Americans are ignorant of basic scientific principles. Most don't know the number of planets in the solar system, and only 21% of the 1,225 adults questioned scored 60 percent or higher on 20 basic science questions. Mourned museum president Ellen Futter, "The public's understanding of science remains frighteningly low." Question: Can't the same be said of the American public's understanding of nearly everything?

(*Tampa Tribune, April 25*)

["Snippets" are derived and rewritten from the referenced sources. Please send your clippings to the editor.]

“NBC-TV’s ‘Now’ on power of prayer” (from page 1)

Murphy referred to Dossey's discovery of "130 laboratory studies, more than half of which, [Dossey] says, prove prayer works." Unmentioned was that his sources were primarily parapsychology journals. Faith-healers were endorsed. And so on . . .

Dr. Sampson had indeed been interviewed, but only, it turns out, for use as a prop to be dispatched with as one might swat away a gnat. Having spent an hour before the camera, only 3 1/2 sentences (and *not* his ace material) survived editing. Introducing him as chairman of the National Council Against Health Fraud, Murphy may have created the false impression that Sampson equates prayer with “fraud.” Murphy then tells the pre-Easter week audience, “And guess what. Like many doctors, he doesn’t buy the prayer study in the cardiac ward,” which was referred to as “the most staggering of all” (unlike most, this study *was* from a medical journal). But neither Murphy nor Dossey even hinted that *within his own book* Dossey acknowledges that the study had actually “missed the mark. . . . [S]tatistically significant life-or-death effects . . . simply did not occur.”

Immediately after the show aired, I faxed a note to Fischer which read in part:

Now I understand why my input was not desired. You squandered a prime opportunity to teach the nation a sorely needed lesson in critical thinking.

Shame on them.

[Editor's note: A similar version of this article appears in this summer's issue of Free Inquiry. The author's 1990 critique of the CCU study (from Free Inquiry) and the CCU study itself (from the Southern Medical Journal) are available from TBS for a self-addressed stamped envelope.]

“Book Review: Healing Words” (from page 3)

modern medicine to these issues, and an unconscious drive to deny demonstrated facts.”

A standard method of scientific experimentation is called into question: “It appears that double-blind studies can sometimes be steered in directions [by] the thoughts . . . of the experimenters. This might shed light on why skeptical experimenters appear unable to replicate the findings of . . . ‘true believers’ [who] seem more able to produce positive results.” Nice try. But on those rare occasions when skeptics are invited in by “true believers” simply to review and tighten their notoriously lax controls, their positive results almost invariably evaporate.

There is no evidence in *Healing Words* that its author is familiar with the work of MacArthur Award-winner James Randi in exposing psi claims. He does quote CSICOP Fellow Ray Hyman, identified as “a well-known critic of parapsychology,” but only to seemingly compliment the random-event generator experiments by Helmut Schmidt of the Mind Science Foundation (“... If there are flaws in his work, they are not the more obvious

or common ones.”). The National Research Council’s 1988 and 1991 reports on “Enhancing Human Performance,” which reached conclusions highly critical of psi phenomena, are acknowledged, but are dismissed in a five-page Appendix as biased and unsupported by the evidence — the *real* evidence — found primarily in “parapsychology journals [which] have peer-review standards as rigorous as many medical journals.” (But parapsychologists’ peers are more parapsychologists; and look at what even the *Southern Medical Journal*’s “rigorous” peer-review process endorsed!)

Dossey refers unflatteringly to the "many New Age health 'authorities' who speak and write endlessly of the marvelous results one can expect if certain measures are aggressively undertaken . . ." He seems to sincerely believe that he has little or nothing in common with them, since his entreaty is for the adoption, by doctor and patient alike, of an attitude of calm "prayerfulness," to open the gateway to the Divine and thus facilitate natural healing. I suspect that most of Dossey's readers will hear in his *Healing Words* a harmony of truth and majesty. Perhaps I am tone deaf, but all I hear is a cacophony of New Age psychobabble. □

[Editor's note: A similar version of this review appears in this summer's Skeptical Inquirer.]

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“Chairman’s Corner” (from page 2)

to intergalactic sexual experiments, and the public now has grounds to be extremely skeptical about the validity of regression hypnosis. The questioner then quoted to Dr. Mack an observation by Mark Twain: "There are some things so stupid only an expert could believe them!"

The next day, retired Air Force major James McGaha presented a humorous and entertaining “Illustrated History of UFOs” at a luncheon. Interestingly, this talk was given on the 47th anniversary of the first modern “flying saucer” report by pilot Kenneth Arnold near Mt. Ranier (just south of the conference site) on June 24, 1947. The term “flying saucer” was first used by the press in connection with this sighting. McGaha suggested that Arnold had actually seen “mountain mirages,” and showed a slide of such mirage images appearing to hover above a mountain ridge. McGaha also documented interesting correlations between the releases of science fiction movies in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, and the frequency and types of UFO reports.

In a separate talk, noted aerospace journalist, author, and UFO expert Philip Klass discussed the “Roswell Crashed Saucer” incident. In July 1947, the Roswell, New Mexico, newspaper reported the recovery of mysterious debris by a rancher at an isolated desert site, and a young Air Force publicity officer hastily referred to it as a crashed flying saucer. From that carelessly dropped little nugget an entire gold mine has been constructed by UFO believers. After the initial publicity, which waned the following day when the initial erroneous press account

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50-page catalogue
(30% discounts available through TBS)
59 John Glenn Dr. • Buffalo, NY 14228

• Skeptical Inquirer •

Flagship journal of
CSICOP • Box 703 • Buffalo, NY 14226

• Skeptic •

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• Skeptics UFO Newsletter •

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404 "N" St., S.W. • Wash., DC 20024

TBS Statement of Income and Expenditures for fiscal year 1993 (6/1/93 - 5/31/94)

I. Beginning balance from previous year	\$ 487.52
II. Income	
A. New memberships/subscriptions	\$ 110.00
B. Renewals	640.00
C. Donations	495.00
D. Prometheus book orders (incl. P&H received)	144.76
TOTAL	\$ 1389.76
III. Expenditures	
A. Newsletters	\$ 666.87
B. Postage, fax, shipping	212.79
C. Prometheus book orders	139.53
D. Florida Corporation 1994 Annual Report fee	61.25
TOTAL	\$ 1080.44
IV. Current financial assets	
A. Checking account	\$ 794.52
B. Stamps, post cards	2.32
TOTAL	\$ 796.84
V. Current liabilities	\$ 0.00
VI. Net balance (I + II - III; IV - V) as of 5/31/94	\$ 796.84
VII. Est. cost of printing/mailling V.7, No.1 in 7/94	\$ 205.00

All financial records are available for inspection by
anyone with a legitimate need or concern.

Faithfully submitted,
Gary P. Posner, Treasurer

TBS in the Media

Michelle Bearden's front-page article in the April 18 *Tampa Tribune*, about Biblical prophecy of the world's impending demise (by the year 2000), noted TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" for proof of any supernatural event. Gary Posner's response to Bearden's query as to who would receive the \$1,000 were the world to end on cue: "Whoever is left to accept it."

Posner was also quoted in Tonya Smith's article about the 'power of prayer' in the May 7 *Jackson (Tenn.) Sun*. And Posner and Terry Smiljanich were Liz Alpert's guests on her Jones Intercable public access TV show, *Tampa Bay Today*, which aired several times in early May.

National Center for Science Education

TBS wishes to make our readers aware of the NCSE, which

works to promote the teaching of evolution in the classroom and to oppose the teaching of creation pseudoscience. One year's membership, including two issues of its semi-annual journal *Creation/Evolution* and four *NCSE Reports*, costs \$25. Address: P.O. Box 9477, Berkeley, CA 94709.

30% Discount on Prometheus Books

In our last issue we offered our readers a 40% discount on all Prometheus Books orders through TBS. Although Prometheus does offer TBS a 40% discount (plus P&H charges), offering the full discount to our readers results in TBS incurring a loss when we in turn ship the books.

TBS must therefore limit the discount offer to 30%. As stated last issue (and in our p. 8 box), please also include the appropriate P&H charges, and make checks payable to "Tampa Bay Skeptics."

LETTERS • READERS' FORUM

Editor: When I joined last year, I envisioned TBS as taking a more active role in investigating paranormal claims than seems to be the case. I agree with Tom Leckrone's comments in the Spring *TBS Report*, and suggest that an investigating committee or response team should be set up. I'll make an effort to attend the next meeting (I missed the last two) and try to stir up some discussion then.

I have recently picked up a couple of magazines, *Kindred Spirit* and *Fate*, which are chock-full of potential topics for skeptical inquiry: "nature spirits," shamanism, healing, dowsing, cryptozoology, pyramid theories, and so on. There's even an open invitation to visit the site of a "haunting." Some of these claimants would probably welcome a chance to try to convince a group of skeptics.

Joe Lucas, Clearwater

In my experience, proponents of the paranormal are generally not interested in proving their claims to skeptics. An exception was Joan Morin, the only "psychic" so far to allow herself to be tested by us — she failed (see TBS Report, Fall 1989). The Rev. Tom Chatlin, from Greater Ministry in Tampa, has recently been in touch with claims of faith-healings. He is attempting to find one such case which can stand up to our critical scrutiny.

And how's this for a possible name for a rapid response team: the Tampa Bay Skeptics "DIRTY RATS" (Detectives In Response To Your Reports of Anomalous yet True Sightings)? Then again, maybe not. —G.P.

Editor: I'm happy to be able to take advantage of your substantial discount from Prometheus Books as announced in the Spring *TBS Report*, and I thank you for it. Enclosed is a check for Joe Nickell's *Psychic Sleuths* (containing Posner's chapter on Noreen Renier). It will go to our fine library for two good reasons, the second of which is that my apartment is now so overstuffed with books that it simply cannot accommodate any more.

I'm also pleased to report that the manuscript of the

tract that I began 18 months ago, now titled *Darwin's Creation-Myth*, is nearly complete. I suppose it will be at least three months before it is actually in print. Let us all pray as fervently as possible that it won't suffer the misfortune of being "scooped" by someone else's similar production, which seems all too likely.

With congratulations on your fine work . . .

Alexander Mebane, Venice

*I am confident that no one will successfully refute Darwin before your tract is published (let us know how interested readers can order a copy). I've also donated a copy of *Psychic Sleuths* to the main branch of the public library in Tampa. And thanks for the extra \$\$\$ donation to TBS (once again)! —G.P.*

The following edited (for space) letter from a TBS member appeared in the May 2 Tampa Tribune, in response to Michelle Bearden's "Doomsday" article mentioned on p. 6:

End-of-the-world prophets have been around since time immemorial, it seems. Author James Randi, in his 1990 book, *The Mask of Nostradamus*, lists 30 failed predictions by various well-known prophets throughout history. Since these types of prognostications are almost a cottage industry among many of the faithful, it is certainly no surprise that we'd be inundated with such claims now, with the approach of the millennium.

Many, if not most, end-time doomsdayers base their claims on their own interpretation of scripture. Since the Bible is notorious for self-contradiction and has been used to justify almost *any* position, I find it incredible that someone as distinguished as Darrell Fasching, the USF religious studies professor, would play the scripture-interpretation game. He should know better.

To quote Randi: "Judging from the record earned by the soothsayers in this matter, we may safely assume that our planet will continue very much the same as it is for some considerable period into the future. I, for one, am not worried." To that I say, Amen.

Greg Simpson, Clearwater

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Announcing...

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Scheduled: Open Forum; Video from recent
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CARMEN MANIS ROOM (2nd FLOOR)
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Note
earlier
time

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"Chairman's Corner" (from page 5)

was corrected, the incident dropped off the UFO radar screen, but was later resurrected by bestselling UFO authors and turned into a chronicle of crashed saucers and recovered aliens being kept alive by the U.S. government!

Klass noted that the original press accounts described the debris as a small pile of tin foil, parchment-like paper, sticks of wood, scotch tape, and pieces of rubber. Some of the tape had a floral design on it! Klass then described a "radar corner reflector," a creation of tin foil, paper, and balsa wood, taped together to form intersecting flat planes, borne by weather balloons to intensify radar returns (used during radar's infancy). As Klass pointed out, it is possible that aliens have conquered space in vehicles made of tin foil and paper. It is much more probable, however, that the crashed "saucer" was simply an errant balloon-borne radar corner reflector. And what of the floral pattern on the tape? During WW II, some radar targets were produced in shops also being used to manufacture women's garments!

Allegedly, Hollywood is about to release a "based on a true story" movie about Roswell. The millions who will see this movie will not have an opportunity to hear Klass discuss this transparent story. When I contemplated this, the crowd of hundreds in attendance at the CSICOP conference suddenly seemed infinitesimally small.

Next issue: Part II



1113 Normandy Trace Road
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TBS "\$1,000 Challenge"

Tampa Bay Skeptics is offering \$1,000 and a place in history to anyone able to provide TBS with verifiable scientific proof of any paranormal phenomenon. This notice represents an open invitation to any and all Florida UFOlogists, psychics, astrologers, dowzers, and the like. Please contact TBS for complete details.

The James Randi Fund c/o Mr. K. Lewis

142 West 49th Street, Suite 12H
New York, NY 10019

and

The CSICOP Legal Defense Foundation
P.O. Box 703
Buffalo, NY 14226

...are assisting in defending against lawsuits brought by proponents of the paranormal. Both funds hope also to be able to provide assistance to other skeptics in need. Please consider a donation.

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